

Amor, Ergo Sum – What makes us valuable?

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What makes things valuable? Have you ever wondered what makes things worth what they are? Why, for example is gold much more valuable than, say, concrete? Or why is it more expensive to live in Fairfax than it is to live in Blacksburg?

I ask you this question because I believe that the question has an important answer. You see, I believe that we are fascinated with valuable things. Let me illustrate.

Suppose I came into church this morning with incontrovertible proof of a hidden treasure somewhere in the vicinity of Manassas. Suppose I showed you the documents, and this wasn't a farce. It was truly there. The treasure is big, I would tell you. There is a huge amount of money. In addition, the treasure is on public land, so it is basically "there for the taking." Millions of dollars worth of gold and diamonds just lying in a field hiding under a few strategically placed stones.

Of course, the first thing you might think is that I am running a scam. But bear with me for a moment. Imagine that I gave you proof that this treasure was there, and you believed me. Let me ask you this question, how many of you would take a drive to the prescribed spot right after church? Or perhaps I should ask (and this is a rhetorical question – I don't want you to answer it). How many of you would go and take a drive right away?

My guess is that most of us would at least go take a look as soon as possible. We are fascinated with valuable things. But what makes things valuable?

The first thing I would like to look at is how most people determine value. And by most people, I mean, if you were to ask a random person on the street, how would they determine that something was valuable?

But before we explore that, perhaps you are wondering why does it matter? Perhaps you wouldn't be asking me that question (why does it matter), if I had actually told you where to find a treasure that would make you rich. But anyway, why does it matter to know what makes things valuable. Well, it is important, because of a fundamental trait of human beings. We like, or perhaps I should use a stronger word, we LOVE valuable things. We are impressed by things and people that are worth a lot.

You know, if I were to set up a talk somewhere down the street, and rented an auditorium to do a talk, chances are, that I would have an audience of about 5 people – my wife, and a couple of friends, who don't really want to be there, but feel they should support my little endeavor. On the other hand, I can assure you that if Bill Gates were to rent that same hall, that place would be packed, and chances are the fire marshal would have serious concerns about safety because of the amount of people. Why is that?

Ok, you might argue that it is because I am a lousy public speaker – which would probably be a valid argument – a very rude and insensitive one, but valid anyway. However, even if I were a phenomenal speaker, the numbers would be similar. Oh, perhaps my numbers would go up by a few. But Bill Gates would still get the numbers.

The truth is we are fascinated with things that are worth a lot. And Bill Gates fits that profile. He is worth more than any other person in the world. I'm sure you've heard the famous stories about how much Mr. Gates makes in an hour. You know the ones that say that if Bill Gates were walking along, and suddenly dropped a \$1000 bill, it would be waste of time for him to pick it up. He would lose more money by picking it up, than he would by just leaving it there. Of course, from an economists view, these stories don't really make sense, because picking up the money, doesn't mean he isn't making the other money. But I digress. The point is that these stories fascinate us, because we are amazed that someone could make more than \$1000 dollars in the time it takes to pick something up from the ground.

And you are still wondering, how does this relate to anything? The answer lies in the fact that as Christians we are called to love our neighbors, to go the extra mile, to be fascinated with a gospel that appears to tell us to consider important things that have very little worth. And to many people this doesn't make sense.

How can we in our right mind tell people that they should pay little attention to riches? Money doesn't make you happy, some have said. However, there are oodles of studies that show that on average people with more money report being happier than people with less money. In other words, when asked to fill out a rating of happiness, people with more money rate higher, than people who fill out the survey who have less money. It just seems counterintuitive to tell people that they should throw away everything that is valuable in order to concentrate on things that aren't valuable at all.

And my friends, that is why I consider the question "what makes things valuable?" a very important question. Because, I believe that Christianity doesn't ask people to reject things that are valuable for things that are not. I believe that Christianity simply asks people to value those things that are truly valuable. So we come back to the question, what is TRULY valuable? And how can we decide if something is valuable?

I said earlier, that we wanted to explore how a random person might attribute value to things. Using other vocabulary, how might "the world" decide if something was valuable? I don't like saying it that way, because it implies that other people attribute value in this way, but WE – who, by implication are SO MUCH BETTER, do it in another way. The truth is that most of us do these same things all the time.

Here are a few ways in which we tend to attribute value to things.

1. We attribute value to things which are rare

It is one of the oldest tricks in money making. If you can find something that is very rare, it will be worth a LOT of money.

Gold is more valuable than silver because there is less of it. Platinum is more valuable than gold because there is even less of that. Diamonds are valuable because there aren't a whole lot of them. If I step out into my back yard, I can probably find lots of rocks, and sticks, but no diamonds.

Oh you might argue that diamonds are valuable because they are pretty, and they shine, and reflect the light in nice way. I say rubbish. Perhaps you've heard of Cubic Zirconium. They tell me that unless you are pretty well versed in these things, you can't tell the difference between these--at least not from a distance of more than a few feet. However, you can buy a Cubic Zirconium at Wal-Mart for \$20 dollars, while a diamond of the same size would cost hundreds of dollars more.

Perhaps you've heard of stamp collecting. People collect little pieces of paper that the post office prints to keep track of mailing things. It turns out that if there are very few copies of a certain type of stamp, this stamp is worth a lot of money. A very rare stamp - just a tiny 1 inch by 1 inch of paper -- can be valued at thousands of dollars just by virtue of the fact that it is the only one of its kind.

So we attribute value to things that are rare.

2. We attribute value to things that we can exchange for other things that we want

That is why money is valuable. It is valuable because we can use money to get other things that we want. The interesting about money is that for some people, it is no longer valuable only as means to get things they want – they just want money, in order to have money

3. We attribute value to things that make our lives easier and more comfortable

In fact, the easier something makes our life, the more valuable (the more we would be willing to pay to pay such an item). That is why Roll's Royce cars are more expensive than Chevy's. It is because they are designed for extreme comfort and ease. People are given value this way as well. If you can provide me a better service than what's-his-face down the street, then I am probably willing to give you more money and recommend you to my friends.

4. Finally, we attribute value to people who have a lot of numbers 2 and 3. If we value things that we can use to get things we want (like money) and we value things that make our lives more comfortable, it seems

logical that we should value people who have a lot of those things (money and nice things that make their lives comfortable).

- a. Perhaps you don't think it is true – if you are a parent, would you like your daughter to marry someone (all other things being equal) who makes 100 thousands dollars a year, or someone who makes somewhere around 10 thousand dollars a year
- b. Who would you most likely ask for an opinion on an important matter – Bill Gates (or if you don't like Bill Gates in particular, someone else who is worth a lot in dollars) or the beggar on the street who is asking you for food?

So, we've established that most people attribute value to things or people either because they are "rare", they can trade them for something else they want, they make their lives easier, or they have one of the first three things. Perhaps you can think of others – but my guess is that at some point they would somehow match up into those 4 categories.

The question then becomes is this is good way to look at value? I mean if we use the criteria above, can we be pretty sure that we will be getting a good analysis. If we were to compare the choices we made on value for those things that "truly" are valuable, would they be the same? Are those criteria sufficient for choosing how valuable, how important, a person is, for example? How do we decide how important a person is? Perhaps you've heard the expression, so-and-so is worth 50 million dollars – meaning that if you add up all their possessions and then subtracted the amount that they owe other people, the number you get is how much they are "worth."

In which case, I am not worth very much. As it turns out, if you add up my possessions, and then subtract all that I owe to other people or institutions, you get a number which you don't learn about until after 4th grade – it's a complex type of concept called a negative number. Of course, even if you don't know me, I hope you agree that I am worth something--that I am worth being polite to, that I am worth listening to (if at least for a couple of minutes), that I am worth caring about.

So we have a problem. Our general views of attributing value to people don't quite work. In fact, even though we have developed this way of looking at people, it is intuitively wrong. We say that people are worth the amount of possessions they have, but this wouldn't even hold up in court.

They tell me, at least as far as insurance goes, that a human life is worth around 1 million dollars – This is based on yet a different set of issues. Ok, so we know that we can't sum up a human life based on its service to me, or the amount of possessions that a person has accumulated, so perhaps we can set some number that will cover the cost. Of course, most of know that this number only works if you have actually accumulated some wealth, or have some status. Very few people would pay a million dollars for the indigent who freezes to death because he can't find a warm place to sleep in winter, or the children in Brazil that are killed every day by corrupt police in order to control the population. They just can't see spending any resources on people that seem to be, in essence, a drain on society.

We cringe at these stories. How could we think of people as simple resource hogs to be dealt with, but let me ask you this, what alternative to we offer? Why should we value people, and upon what reason?

As Christians we have a unique perspective. We believe that the issue of value is supremely informed by the Bible, and the way that God looks at people. So perhaps let us explore what the Bible says about this issue. How does God view people? How does God gives value to people?

1 Peter 2:9

9But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

So God gives us value, as a parent gives value to his child. It is one thing to talk in the abstract about "people in general." It is a whole different story to talk about one's kids. I don't have kids, but most parents I have spoken

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to would do anything for their kids. Obviously, there are a few aberrations, but they are truly the exceptions that prove the rule. We realize that most parents give an infinite value to their kids because it seems so odd when a parent doesn't do just that.

Story

William Gladstone, in announcing the death of Princess Alice to the House of Commons, told a touching story. The little daughter of the Princess was seriously ill with diphtheria. The doctors told the princess not to kiss her little daughter and endanger her life by breathing the child's breath. Once when the child was struggling to breathe, the mother, forgetting herself entirely, took the little one into her arms to keep her from choking to death. Rasping and struggling for her life, the child said, "Momma, kiss me!" Without thinking of herself the mother tenderly kissed her daughter. She got diphtheria and some days thereafter and was soon laid to rest beside her daughter.

This is what a parent would do for her child – It is my guess that what many parents would do for their children is precisely that -- anything. This is precisely the relationship that God has with us. We are his children, and when we asked him to demonstrate his love. He gave us his kiss – he died on a Cross afflicted with our sins – just as Princess Alice died afflicted with the sickness of her daughter.

So we are valuable because we are children of God, but how do we become children of God. And here is the best part of it all –

1 John 3:1

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him

See the grand thing about being valued because we are Children of God is that we don't really have to do anything to get there. We become children of God not because we are great people, not because we come to church, not because of how much money we have, we become children of God because GOD LOVED US. This, my friend, is the heart, the essence, the meat, of the gospel. This is the portion of the gospel that actually informs everything else – *the evangelis*. It is also where we get the principle of Bible Value.

The principle of value says: *"Some things are loved because they have value, and other things have value because they are loved. Human beings are the latter."*

This is the principle of the Bible, that we humans have an infinite value as children of God, but this distinction of being children of God – that is having the closest of relationships with God – some biblical analogies use marriage -- is not because of anything that we do. It is not because we have faith; it is not because we can prophecy. It is simply because God has loved us. It is the test of value that will never go wrong on you. We are valued because of our relationship with God. It is a value of friendship.

The famous Descartes coined the philosophical existential phrase, "I think, therefore I am." – Or if you are feeling a bit scholarly "Cogito, ergo Sum." Descartes of course was trying to prove that we humans do in fact exist (some philosophers go crazy over things that most of us take for granted). Some people say that people say things in Latin to satisfy the following Latin principle:

Quidquid latine dictum sit, altum videtur.

Or 'Whatever is said in Latin sounds profound.'

But the Christian has a different phrase to explain existence. Of course, this is actually profound. The Christian explains his existence like this: *Amor, ergo sum*, or roughly, I am loved, therefore, I am.

Illustration

By the way, this isn't really a foreign concept. We actually have it built into us, if we just thought about. We use this concept all the time in reference to pets. I have a little dog at home that is tremendously valuable to me. I would spend quite a bit of money if she got sick or something happened to her.

Why is she valuable to me? Is it because she is a dog? Probably not. Is it because she has possessions? no not really. It is simply because she is loved. She is valuable because my wife and I love the little dog and she has found a place deep into our hearts. If you have pets, you can probably understand.

Now you may be tempted to think that they are valuable just because they are animals – which is to some extent true, but mostly they are valuable because we love them. If not, why does the Omaha Humane society euthanize somewhere in the range of 23 thousand animals every year? These animals have no value because they aren't loved by a person. When the animals come to the humane society they are doomed unless someone loves them.

Isn't this what Paul is talking about in Ephesians when he says in the marvelous passage about the chosen Christian – and I'm going to read the whole passage, because it is just amazing. Hopefully you can forgive me.

Ephesians 1:4-14

4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—

6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace

8 that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. 9 And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ,

10 to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

11 In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, 12 in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.

13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

See, we are valuable because God chose us from the beginning. We have value because God decided to Love us.

You remember the animals at the Omaha humane society. They are doomed unless they are loved by someone because their value is totally tied up in someone who will choose to love them. It is the same with us. Our value is totally tied up in someone who will love us. Or better said: Someone who has loved us. Someone who will love us. Someone who loves us even today.

This issue of value is why 1 Corinthians states that Love is more important than good works, or helping people out, or preaching the gospel. Paul even goes to the extreme as saying that without love not even faith is important. If you've ever read this passage, I hope you have wondered about that. How come Love is even more important than faith. Aren't we saved by grace, through faith? Yes, that is true. But it is Love that allows us to be valuable enough to save. Love makes us important to God. Love makes us something worth saving.

But here is the amazing thing about God's Love. God's Love is not simply some fuzzy concept where God decides that we are cool people. See, the issue of Love involves relationship. God loves us in that he wants to have a relationship with us. In a similar (albeit much smaller scale, and in a much more imperfect way) I love my dog in that I want to have some sort of relationship with her. I want her to recognize me when I come home. I would like her to come when I call. I want her to be able to return that love. I would like her to be happy when I come home. So I shower her with affection, food, protection to this end.

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Of course, this is complicated. It's not just about getting things back from my dog, but there is some part of Love that wants a return. I give to my dog not expecting that she will thank me, but because I love her. So God loves us not because he expects thanks but because He loves us. And because of this love we are valuable, important, people.

This is why Jesus tells his disciples in John 15:15

15I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. 16You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. 17This is my command: Love each other.

We mentioned that Love is not just some obscure principle. It's about a relationship. It's about a friendship that God wants so much that he would give everything to us. It's about a friendship that God values so much that he is willing to come down and call us friends, and tell us about His father's business – because he wants us to share his “life,” so to speak, with Him.

There is one little caveat to all this – but it is an important caveat. We said that Love was the essence of the gospel. The caveat to the gospel is that God will not force His love on us. We can reject it. And when we reject God's love, we in essence reject the value that we have. We are valuable because of the fact that God loves us. If we reject that love, we are in a very real way, devaluing ourselves.

Just as the poor little puppies at the humane society are doomed if no one loves them, we also are doomed when we reject that Someone who loves us. The difference is that the poor puppies in the humane society start out with no one to love them – they are at a huge disadvantage. We, on the other hand have a choice, and we start out with someone loving us. That is what the cross is all about – you remember the text

Romans 5

8But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

You remember the principle of value says: **“Some things are loved because they have value, and other things have value because they are loved. Human beings are the latter.”**

I hope you realize that this affects everything. I could go on for another hour on how this informs so many aspects of the gospel, but let me just list a few in quick fashion.

The principle of value explains why:

1. Christians are willing to sacrifice everything to follow Christ (they know that they are valuable because they are loved, not because of what they have accumulated)
2. Christians place such an emphasis on loving people (because they know that people are infinitely valued because God loves them)
3. Why true Christians churches should be built on friendship (because if our existence is based on a friendship with God, doesn't it make sense that we could help other people better their existence through friendship with them).

And there are so many more... Perhaps you can come up with a few this afternoon.

Let me give it to you once again because it is really what the gospel is all about. The principle of value is what I call a matter of life and death. “Some things are loved because they have value, and other things have value because they are loved. Human beings are the latter.”

We are loved, therefore we are. Our life is TRULY in God.